

## **Giving Thanks to God — 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10**

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### **Thankfulness Board**

In our kitchen at home we have this large frame backed with chicken wire with a banner over that reads “Thankful.” It was my wife’s idea to help our family cultivate grateful hearts. We clip pictures of family and friends to the chicken wire and write out on notecards other things we are grateful for along with a little drawing. We ask the kids what we can say, “Thank you,” to God for. It ranges from bacon to the “Twinsies” to whatever happens to be right in front of Maranatha when I ask her, “Refrigerator! Stool! Titus!” It is a good practice—giving thanks—especially when there is grumbling.

What we see in our passage this morning are the little notecards of thankfulness that the Apostle Paul would clip up on chicken wire when he considers the believers of the Thessalonian church. He launches into this letter by declaring his gratitude for many graces that he has witnessed among this church. In commending them, he holds them up for us through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as an example to follow. We ought to be like the Thessalonians. After all, we too are a church “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” as Paul describes them in v.1. They have been united with the Triune God—they are fundamentally a very different kind of gathering of people. No demographic or affinity group is so closely bound together as those who have been folded into the relationship of love of the Three-And-One.

### **The Manner of Thanksgiving (v.2-4)**

So Paul begins his thanksgiving. He gives three means by which he thanks God for this church. The first is in prayer, constantly mentioning these believers. By this I don’t think Paul means that he does nothing but pray for the Thessalonians, but rather that he frequently prays for them. It is his practice to be regularly interceding for this church he helped establish, just as he

does for all the churches he planted. What he actually writes is that he “makes remembrance” for them. His prayers bring this church to the forefront of God’s thinking. This is far more encouraging than a cliché, “I’ll pray for you.” It’s much more than that; it is saying, “When I thank God for you, I will pray that you might be at the front of God’s thoughts.” Paul’s gratitude is radically oriented on God and what he has done and is doing among these believers.

This is seen in the second means of Paul’s thanksgiving. Not only is he praying for them that they would be first in God’s thoughts, but he recounts to their Father who is in Heaven the evidence of his gracious work in their lives. Here he employs the triad of Christian virtue: faith, love, and hope. We see Paul commend these three in 1 Corinthians 13:13. He declares his gratitude to God for how their faith is not without works, that their faith has manifested itself in tangible good deeds toward others. Furthermore, he is grateful for how their love for the Lord and one another has been expressed in genuine care for others—they aren’t just sitting around singing “Kumbaya.” Their love is being worked out in life. And third, he is grateful for their steadfastness, their perseverance or endurance. We see in v.6 that this church has suffered significant affliction, and he concludes the triad with this characteristic to draw attention here. They have held on because their hope is in the Lord Jesus Christ. And we see at the end of the chapter that this hope that they have is chiefly in Christ’s return. They persevere through affliction because their hope is not in this life or what this life can offer. They persevere because their hope is in another world, the coming kingdom of Christ.

The third means of Paul’s thanksgiving is not as clear since the ESV breaks up this really long sentence by starting a new sentence here at v.4. The confident knowledge Paul and his companions have of God’s sovereign choosing of these saints is a means of his thanksgiving. As Paul considers the doctrine of election and how that has come about in the lives of this church,

he is stirred with gratitude. “Ha! God *chose* you! How wonderful! He set his love upon you, dear brothers and sisters!” Here Paul gives a great example of how theology ought to move us to doxology—doctrine stirs us to praise. Scholar Greg Beale captures it well, “Without a prayerful contemplation of divine blessings, there can be no attitude of thanksgiving.”<sup>1</sup> Paul’s gratitude is well founded on God’s activity.

Now consider Paul’s example here. He is commending himself and cultivating a sweet relationship with these Christians by expressing his gratitude. He doesn’t always do this. He launches pretty quick into getting after the Galatians. But even to the Corinthians, with all of their really messed up problems, Paul starts by thanking God for them. Giving thanks to God for the grace that *is* evident in a Christian’s life does not mean you don’t get to the areas of life that need to be addressed. But you win an audience for yourself through expressing gratitude. Pastor Sam Crabtree’s book *Practicing Affirmation* argues for this. He writes, “Giving praise does wonders for the other person’s sense of hearing.”<sup>2</sup> He means if there is a relational context of affirmation and gratitude to God for the person and the relationship, the other person will be more inclined to listen to you. The exhortations Paul gives later in the letter are couched in this context of gratitude. You can imagine how much more open the Thessalonians are to these admonitions when they know their beloved apostle is *for* them.

Consider this in your own relationships. If your marriage, parenting, friendships, or work relationships were more characterized by expressing gratitude than by complaints or corrections, how different would those relationships look? Don’t you think the harder word would be better received? Or maybe if we were more diligent in our private lives to reflect on things for which we ought to give thanks to God, we wouldn’t be so bitter or angry. Especially with other

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, IVPNTC (IVP: Downers Grove, 2003), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Sam Crabtree, *Practicing Affirmation* (Crossway: Wheaton, 2011), 54.

Christians, we could far more readily overlook a minor offense because we are more diligent in thinking about the manifest grace of God in that person's life than we are brooding about the slight. God has set his electing love on that Christian, so maybe we can overlook that offense.

### **The Ground of Thanksgiving (v.5)**

This long sentence of gratitude concludes in v.5 as Paul gives the ground of his thanksgiving. He gives thanks for the Thessalonians by bringing them to mind, remembering their faith, love, and hope, and knowing of their election. But he gives thanks for them *because* of the work of God in them as they received the gospel. He is grateful to God for these Christians because the good news about Jesus' death and resurrection that redeems sinners came to them by word, power, the Holy Spirit, and in full conviction.

Apparently the gospel did not come in this same way in all the cities that Paul preached. By drawing attention here to how they received the gospel, he seems to indicate the especially positive reception his preaching had. This reception is underscored in v.9 by the radical change that took place in their lives as they turned *from* idols and turned *to* the living and true God. Paul's ministry among them was not just as a highfalutin, smooth talker. Their proclamation of the gospel in Thessalonica was accompanied by displays of divine power—presumably in astounding miracles—by the manifest presence of the Holy Spirit, and by the full conviction of those preaching. Paul wasn't just hawking his message for shameful gain as some itinerant speakers were doing (and still do). No, God moved mightily among this people as Paul declared to them the incredible reality that Jesus is the God-Man who died to bear God's wrath against sinners and that Jesus rose from the dead proving that he had defeated sin and its curse.

For this reason—because of how the gospel came to them, and they so readily received it—Paul “gives thanks to God always for all of” them (v.2). O, that we would have such a reason

to give thanks to God. That's what this Planting Joy stuff is all about. We so eagerly desire for this gospel to come to our neighbors and the nations from this corner. We yearn for the hearty reception of the gospel that we would imitate Paul in giving thanks to God always for all those who hear and respond to the gospel. But before the gospel is received in power and in the Holy Spirit and in full conviction, it must be received in word. And I am far too timid in speaking that word with our neighbors. Perhaps you feel the same. May our past failures or shortcomings in sharing the gospel not hinder our present call to be faithful in doing so.

### **The Motivation of Thanksgiving (v.6-10)**

We have seen that Paul has told us the manner and the ground of his thanksgiving, and now in v.6-10 he gives further motivation for his thanksgiving, namely their lives and testimony. Paul is spurred on in gratefulness because they proved to be like the fourth soil of Jesus' parable. The seed was cast and due to the resulting affliction the Thessalonians experienced, Paul seems to have been concerned that they were like the rocky soil. He feared that they responded readily but would be scorched by the heat of suffering, having no true root. But it was not so! They were like the good soil.

They readily responded to the gospel and were established in the pattern of faithful disciples and the Lord himself. They endured much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit. The heat of persecution didn't cause them to wither away, but like Jesus they endured for the joy that was set before them (cf. Hebrews 12:1-2). Indeed, they endured because of the joy that was set *within* them. They had joy because the Father had set his love on them. They had joy because of the hope of the Son's return. They had joy because the Spirit empowered them. Later in the letter Paul likens himself as a mother and as a father to this church. You can imagine how

grateful he would be to see his children enduring in their faith and walking firmly with the Lord. Little else would cause the Apostle to thankfully praise the Lord more.

But it does get sweeter. They are not just surviving in the fight of faith; they are thriving. They haven't circled the wagons to get through this life with all of its hardships, just holding on long enough for Christ to return. No, they are on the offensive. Hell's hordes are retreating behind the gates, and they will not prevail against the onslaught of the Church's confession (cf. Matthew 16:18). Paul rejoices that "the word of the Lord sounded forth from [them] in Macedonia and Achaia" and their "faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that [Paul] need not say anything" (v.8). The gospel has sounded forth; it has reverberated as a clarion call through all of Greece. Their engagement in the missionary enterprise modeled by Paul has been effective. The gospel echoes throughout the region and beyond as they have proclaimed Christ and him crucified.

The gospel has sounded forth from the Thessalonians like the Horn of Gondor. Recall from *The Lord of the Rings* the horn Boromir carried that when blown in need of deliverance in the realm of Gondor, it would not go unanswered. But rather than a horn calling for help, the Thessalonian trumpet was one of deliverance and would surely accomplish its intended objective. They trumpet the good news about Jesus, and it does not go unanswered. Paul and his missionary partners have no need to speak the gospel in these places. He is so encouraged by this church's engagement in the Great Commission with him.

Paul is now getting reports from other churches even of the Thessalonians' wonderful testimony captured in v.9-10. These Christians, living in a thriving metropolis with all the benefits and enjoyments of a Roman city considered their idols as nothing in comparison to embracing Christ. Food, wealth, position, power, sex, Caesar, the Roman pantheon—all of it was

nothing when considering “the living and true God.” There is no one and nothing like him.

Nothing else satisfies the soul like the One True God. Here Paul is perhaps making an allusion to Jeremiah 10:10, which informs why it is so commendable that they turned from idols to God.

Listen to Jeremiah 10:2-10:

Thus says the LORD: “Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them [3] for the customs of the peoples are vanity. A tree from the forest is cut down and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. [4] They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move. [5] Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good.” [6] There is none like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is great in might. [7] Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For this is your due; for among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is none like you. [8] They are both stupid and foolish; the instruction of idols is but wood! [9] Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish, and gold from Uphaz. They are the work of the craftsman and of the hands of the goldsmith; their clothing is violet and purple; they are all the work of skilled men. [10] But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation.

Our idols may not be made of wood, silver, or gold, but they are nonetheless just as foolish and worthless. And we do well to follow the Thessalonian example of turning to serve the living and true God.

Not only do they serve God, but they wait for the promised return of Jesus, the one who was raised from the dead and is the only one who can deliver from the wrath to come. Paul gratefully commends the Thessalonians’ example. Could the same be said of us? If there was “Big Brother”-like surveillance of your life, could it be said that you are an example to all the

believers of Southeast Michigan as you serve God and wait for the Son? We have need to go on pursuing the habits of grace that the Lord uses to sanctify us and make us into imitation-worthy examples. It is challenging to be diligent in studying the Word, steadfast in prayer, zealous in evangelism, and resolute in relationships of accountability. But these things are for our good. By them the Lord makes us more like himself. Especially prayer, as Pastor JJ said last week—it is in unrelenting prayer that our will is brought into conformity with God's.

### **First Epistle to Five Points**

If 1 Thessalonians 1 was rewritten as “1 Five Points 1,” how would it read? What would the Apostle give thanks for? Perhaps it would go something like this:

Paul, JJ and Brett, to the church of Five Points in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your diligence in the Word, your love for the Truth, and your devotion to the brothers united together in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he is bringing about your endurance, because the gospel has come to you like a seed planted in rich soil, which when watered has grown to be a firmly-rooted tree.

You became imitators of those who have walked faithfully before you, for you have endured the loss of loved ones, trials of various kinds, and the testing of your faith. And this you have done with an abiding joy in Christ alone. Not only have you persevered as a people, but the gospel of Christ has gone forth from you to Oakland County, Detroit, and to the remotest parts of the world. For it has been reported to us the kind of affection you have for us and the love for the mysteries of God declared to you, and how you strive by faith to live according to the way taught in the Lord, and to rejoice in all things and to endure all things until the Day of his coming when you will enter his final rest.